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ABSTRACT

This paper comprises remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley at the Early Childhood Summit in Washington, D.C. on June 23, 2000. The paper notes the emergence of a national consensus about the value of early childhood education. The paper maintains that brain development research coupled with new research on how children learn to read has given child care advocates and educators clear direction about setting public and educational policy. The paper argues that it is imperative to have a new, sustained focus on the years birth through five. The motto, "The Stronger the Start, the Better the Finish," is suggested for this policy focus. The paper challenges professionals to help parents in their child's earliest months, to move beyond the current early childhood system of patchwork programs, to change their thinking about how children think, and to collaborate to increase children's chances for success. The paper highlights the French and Italian early childhood education systems as providing valuable information for this country. The following suggestions offered for consideration by the Summit participants are outlined: (1) expand the Family and Medical Leave Act to allow more parents time with their infants; (2) enact universal voluntary prekindergarten programs; (3) translate research on brain development for parents' use; and (4) elevate the childcare profession and make sure that all teachers have a bachelor's degree with necessary specialized knowledge. (KB)

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Remarks as prepared for delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Early Childhood Summit

Washington, D.C.
June 23, 2000

Thank you, Frank. I have always found that when you ask an immediate subordinate to introduce you they invariably say nice things about you. But let me say some nice things about Frank Holleman as well. Frank is a dedicated public servant, a thoughtful individual and caring father. Frank has an agile mind and his sense of humor is legendary at the Department. We don't understand most of his jokes but they are legendary when we do.

More importantly, Frank Holleman has a long-standing interest in early childhood issues. He is the vice chair of the board of trustees of South Carolina's First Step to School Readiness effort. That's a mouthful, isn't it? But Frank is the right person for the job. And that is why I have asked him to chair a Department-wide early childhood initiative--to make sure that we are doing our very best all across the board.

Let me thank several other people:

Dr. Barbara Bowman for leading the Eager to Learn research effort and the many members of her committee, who have worked so hard to develop these important findings;

Sandy Wigdor, a deputy director at the National Research Council, who has worked tirelessly on this project;

Dr. Eve Agee, the chair of the summit and a very important member of our America Reads staff;

Carol Rasco, one of my senior advisors, and a true friend of all children;

Naomi Karp, who leads our National Institute on Early Childhood Development and who recently traveled with me to Italy to look at some wonderful early childhood practices. Naomi Karp and Judy Heumann, my assistant secretary for special education, were instrumental in funding this effort.

Most of all, I thank all of you for coming. We have people here from almost every state in the country and the right people as well--policy-makers, who can make a powerful difference when you put your minds and expertise together. I know that there are eight or nine

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friends here from South Carolina. Where are you out there? Please give my best to the folks back home.

We are on the verge, as Barbara Bowman will soon tell you, of a new national consensus about the value and importance of early childhood education. This consensus has taken some time to develop and some of us have been working on early childhood issues for over 20 years. This is an issue of great personal importance to me. I know that all of you have a passion for helping all of our children grow and learn.

In the last 10 years, an extraordinary amount of scientific research has been developed that tells us in very clear terms that all of our children, even in the earliest months of their lives, have an amazing ability to learn. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to listen to presentations about what brain researchers are discovering and it is truly astonishing.

We now know that every conversation we have with an infant can literally spark their brain to grow some more. *The nursery rhymes they hear will surely help them in their later years.* That's my nursery rhyme to help you remember as well.

This research, coupled with new research on how children learn to read, has given all of us--childcare advocates and educators--some very clear direction about setting policy. We now know that it is absolutely imperative that we put a new, powerful and sustained focus on the early years--ages 0 to 5 years--, before children even enter first grade.

Put simply, and this should be our collective motto--the stronger the start, the better the finish. Our children are eager to learn, they are creative in how they learn, and they have an extraordinary capacity to learn if we know how to encourage them the right way. Our children are, as I have said so many times before, smarter than we think.

All of this research and the research being presented here today challenges us to do many things:

To help parents in the earliest months when the minds of our children seem to be sparking;

To move beyond the current system of early childhood efforts that is still a patchwork of programs defined by high turnover, little training and minimal compensation;

To appreciate that all the love and caring we give our children will do them little good if we ignore what researchers are telling us. We simply have to change our thinking about how children think. Finally, we have to collaborate and build new partnerships if we are going to have all of our children ready for success.

One of the reasons we invited so many of you from so many different backgrounds to attend this summit--experts from Head Start, social services, health services and education--is to make the very big point that we are all in this together. I believe that if we are going to succeed in making sure that all of our children achieve success as learners, we are going to have to be open-minded to change.

We must be expansive in our thinking, recognize that we have much to

learn from each other, and realize that there are many lessons to be learned from other nations. The Italians and the French, for example, really do have a great deal to teach us about early childhood education.

Several months ago, I had the opportunity to go to Reggio Emilio in Italy, a community that has a worldwide reputation for its creative early childhood programs. It was a very interesting experience. The rigor with which they train their teachers is rather breathtaking. The teachers respect the ideas and values that the children bring to the school and the teachers are smart enough to build on the creativity of the children.

I went to one school in Reggio Emilio and saw a bird fountain that had been designed by the children and built with a very specific set of ideas in mind.

Now, I am not sure that all of you have to become bird fountain experts immediately but surely we have to be open to new ideas, including the many thoughtful recommendations that are presented in this report. Before I make just a few comments about these recommendations let me suggest a broader context and some other policy ideas for your consideration.

First, I believe that we should expand the federal Family and Medical Leave Act to give as many parents as possible the time they need to be with their children in the early months of infancy. That's so very important to getting young infants and children off to a good start. President Clinton is continuing his effort to expand this legislation and I encourage your support.

Second, I am a strong supporter of universal voluntary pre-kindergarten. Let's give all of our children the opportunity to be ready for success when they come to school. This is something that Vice President Gore has been championing for some time.

Several months ago, my Department released the first national survey on America's kindergartners. This study indicated that the work we do in these early years may provide us with the richest opportunity we have to close the achievement gap that already exists when children enter kindergarten.

This is one reason we have spent so much effort shifting the focus of current federal programs to these early years and the first few years of schooling. We are asking the Congress, for example, to set aside $30 million dollars to support a new program to improve the professional development of 15,000 early childhood educators.

Here, it is important to remember that Title I funds can also be used for pre-K initiatives. This is also why we are placing such a strong focus on making sure that all children can read by the end of the third grade, if not earlier.

If we can help spark the minds of our children early on--and give them a strong foundation in basic skills--we make it so much easier for them to keep on learning in their later years. Does this mean that we should be showing flash cards to infants and setting up rows of desks for pre-schoolers? Of course not.

We need to develop the whole child--their emotional, social, physical and cognitive skills as well. This can only happen if we place a much stronger focus on the quality of the teaching in these early childhood years.

A third broad policy concern is to always put parents at the center of what we are doing. We need to translate this powerful new research into practical, hands-on advice to parents. Our Department published the booklet *Building Your Baby's Brain*, which does just that, and I encourage all of you to use this free publication in your work.

We also need to prepare our teachers to recognize that the most lasting learning takes place in social and family contexts--in the family, at school and with friends in the community. All children need a strong sense of community.

I make this point as well. We can revolutionize American education if we can get parents and other caregivers to read to a child 30 minutes a day during these early years. Unfortunately, according to our kindergarten study, less than half of all parents are reading to their children every day. My message to parents is to read, read and then read some more.

Fourth, we simply have to elevate the childcare profession and make sure that all of our teachers our first-rate professionals. Much of what we know about young children's learning and development is not reflected in the majority of early childhood programs. Currently we have no early childhood system for all children. We lack uniform standards and unequal access to high-quality programs and that only continues the inequality that is so deeply ingrained in our nation's fabric.

This is why the very first recommendation of this report is so important. We simply have to expect the best of our children's very first teachers. This is why I endorse the recommendation that every teacher helping children in these early years have a bachelor's degree with the specialized knowledge needed to open the minds of all of our children.

Now, some are going to say that that is much too high a standard. But how are we ever going to overcome the achievement gap that drags so many children down, if we don't give the children who need the most help the best help early on?

If we are ever going to overcome the tyranny of inequality, we simply have to set higher standards for ourselves, and not lose the opportunity to use this precious time when we can do so much to help our children. And it is precious time.

We need teachers who have the capacity to bring out the best in the many, many children who are just learning English. We need teachers who are well trained to work with children with learning disabilities.

Quite frankly and bluntly, we do too much labeling. Far too many children, especially minorities and boys, are tracked into special education because we simply haven't given their first teachers the skills they need to help these children early on. We tell these children that they can't cut it early on, and then we wonder why they give up on themselves.

We have to do better--and we can do better--if we are more demanding of ourselves, and aim high. Above all, we need teachers who understand

how to develop the whole child--their cognitive and motor skills, their physical and mental health, and their positive attitudes toward learning.

I end now with the hope that this opportunity to learn about these important new findings will give you the knowledge you need to make a powerful difference in the lives of millions of children. You are the experts. You are the policy-makers. And you are the teachers and educators who can profoundly impact the future education and well-being of millions of American children.

Thank you for coming to this important conference and please remember--the stronger the start, the better the finish.

Thank you.

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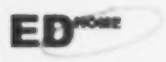

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